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A Linguistic Analysis of Hip-Hop Music

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In any time or setting, music has constantly taken the liberty of fitting language into its mold. In fact, one could say music and language must accommodate one another in order to successfully combine into what our own English language has named "art." At the very least, the meter of lyrics to a song must coincide with the rhythm of that song. One of the most obvious examples, perhaps because of its simplicity in nature, is hip-hop music. Hip-hop artists speak (or "rap") lyrics over a beat that complements their rhythm. Like any other form of art, hip-hop music takes on the two basic goals of making a statement about something and providing entertainment for one or more of the senses. In most cases, hip-hop makes a cultural, political, or comical statement while providing the ears with an atmosphere that welcomes if not demands dancing. And like any other form of art, hip-hop is best enjoyed when both levels are recognized.

Hip-hop is a delicately defined term. Similar genres exist that each function at slightly different levels. Gang rap (more accurately called "gangsta rap") differs in that it usually delivers a message of violence and is not always suitable for dancing. Dance or techno music focuses primarily on creating a dance environment and limits the message, sometimes even omitting it. Hip-hop is unique in that its message is most often positive and more simple and applicable to real life than other similar genres while still creating a dance rhythm. In the end, the factor that makes the difference apparent between the genres is the emphasis placed on lyrics and music. Dance music focuses more on the beat, gang rap relies more heavily on the words, and hip-hop keeps a balance between the two.

Though a select few credible white artists have existed or still exist, hip-hop is basically a creation of the urban black community. Its roots can, in fact, be traced to tribal music in Africa. Just as urban black English appears different than other dialects, hip-hop can be set apart from other forms of singing. In fact, the hip-hop world has coined many of its own words throughout its existence. Different artists tend to insert their own flavor into the songs they produce. As time passes, other artists begin to use these previously personalized words until they become commonplace and newly-coined within the genre.

In this research project, the characteristics of hip-hop will be examined phonologically, semantically, and syntactically in order to better understand the evolution of the language. To illustrate some of the language I have chosen songs performed by A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul, two of the most prominent groups in the hip-hop industry

The phonology that appears in hip-hop music is merely a dialect of Present Day English. However, certain words are altered in pronunciation at times in order to be applied to the song and maintain the proper rhythm. For example, the word "more" is often pronounced [mo]. Similarly, "whore" often becomes [ho]. These two alterations are commonly used as slang in PDE in any dialect. The origination of these changes is unknown, but the use of the latter has become so commonplace in adolescent slang that it most likely dominates the usage of the original word today.

Such omission of the [r] sound is likely the most common phonetic change that any dialect of English exhibits. It appears especially in hip-hop music. For example, De La Soul knows their song "Big Brother Beat" as [bɪg brʌðəbɪt]. Another frequent alteration is the [t] sound to [d]. This occurs in many dialects, as well. To illustrate changes both in a single word, "butter" (see appendix) is pronounced [bʌd] in the song.

this is too general, some dialects don't drop r's.

There are many other phonological changes that appear in hip-hop lyrics that are also indicative of other dialects of English. Verbs that appear in the present progressive usually change the [ɪŋ] sound to a mere [ɪn]. This is a change that could possibly become standard in the future of English since it seems more efficient. Another fairly universal change is the alteration of the word "you" [ju] to [jə]. The combination of two words into one word by omitting a sound is also prevalent. Specifically, "want to" combines into [wɑnə] and "going to" becomes [gɒnə]. The latter also omits the [i] sound and simplifies itself into one less word and one ^{fewer} less syllable. Another example is the phrase "got to" as it becomes [gətə] or sometimes [gɑdə].

All these phonological characteristics contribute to what the hip-hop world calls the "flow." The flow of a song (also track, jam, joint) is basically the rhythm that the rapper

creates over the beat. The origination of the term is not difficult to suppose. When the beat of both music and lyric match up as they should, the art form is complete. This end result creates the specific definition of hip-hop and sets it apart from similar types of music.

Sound changes, though apparent and characteristic of hip-hop, are not quite as drastic as some of the changes in the meanings of words or the creation of new words. Common, everyday words somehow became integrated into the lyrics with different meanings. New words came about with meanings synonymous to those of very old English words, as well. In most cases, however, the meanings of the coined words can only be understood through varying context within different usage in songs. Certain hip-hop artists will take the coined words of others out of their original meaning and put them into new context from time to time, thus giving the word multiple meanings in the genre.

At the end of this report is an appendix which contains some of the particular words that appear in the songs that were examined. The meanings appear along with them. Most of the originations of the words can be speculated. For example, the word "represent" is not taken away from its original meaning much at all. It is more affiliated with the association and respect that an emcee should give to his neighborhood. The idea is not altogether different from high school pride. *- give in context - phrase or sentence*

The meaning of "bagging dimes" is somewhat more difficult to speculate. Taken apart, the word "bag" is used as a verb like this in Standard English. How the word "dime" came to be associated with a female is harder to figure out. The same is true of "shorty," which simply refers to a member of the opposite sex.

"Buggin' Out" is a title of a song by A Tribe Called Quest as well as a phrase used in hip-hop. Bugging out essentially entails the loss of concentration. The most likely source of the terminology is the association of a marijuana roach with this loss of thought. "Smoked out" or "burned out" are other similar states of mind. This assumption is not

stereotypical at all; A Tribe Called Quest, who most likely coined the phrase, lyrically speak of marijuana use.

Words such as "phat" and "mad" have taken on new meanings in the hip-hop world as well. The former has changed from its original spelling, "fat." ^{- same meaning} The most likely source of this spelling change is a corporate marketing which used the purposeful misspelling of the word. The word "mad" has come to be used as an adverb similar to very. In fact, it is used similarly to its adverb form "madly." It can also be used with a new meaning as an adjective.

The word "wack" most likely came from the slang term "wacky." The final sound was dropped in some situations, perhaps to rid of a syllable. It is also used mostly with "emcee." The ending sound of the first word may blend with the beginning sound of the next as in Spanish. Thus, "wacky emcee" would simply become "wack emcee."

"Diss" is a popular word within the genre that is simply a shortening of the word ^{but used as a verb?} "disrespect." It essentially has the same meaning. The word "emcee" has been taken into a new light as "the holder of the microphone." And finally, the word butter has taken a new meaning. It is an adjective meaning "smooth" or "rich." It probably began as "like butter," a comparison which complies to Standard English rules. The "like" must have been eventually dropped.

These are only a few of the innovations of hip-hop semantics. There are many other words used often in hip-hop that are either completely coined or renovated for the purposes of the genre. Some of them allow more possibilities for rhyme, some more possibilities with alliteration. At any rate, the evolution of these words and meanings is an incredible asset to hip-hop lyrics.

The arrangement of hip-hop lyrics is almost no different than in Standard English. The beauty of hip-hop lies in that its rap lyrics which so much resemble speech. Since the roots of hip-hop are within the urban black community, the nature of its lyrics are quite comparable to street talk. Hip-hop artists mostly have a positive outlook in their lyrics

while gang rappers often openly discuss the violence that they might have faced in the street. At times, however, hip-hop artists will show a great deal of innovation in the way they rearrange accepted English syntax in order to create a different attitude or rhythm.

Most of the time, however, the lyrics of hip-hop follow a fairly standard format. Most of the changes in syntax are smaller and very much dialectical. For example, the nonstandard usage of the word "here" in "Electric Relaxation" places it between a demonstrative pronoun and its noun for further emphasis. This is done mostly to add a syllable to the line in order to maintain the beat (the "flow," if you will). This is not altogether limited to hip-hop; it is a fairly common feature of many dialects of English.

Another common feature is the substitution of "got" for the word "have." This occurs in "Electric Relaxation," as well. The meanings are somewhat similar, but only when the past tense of "get" is substituted for the present tense "have." This is a fairly common dialectical innovation as well. It is used in this song in order to create alliteration with the word "goods," which also rhymes with "Woods" in the same line. The similar sounds add flavor to the lyrics.

Improper vowel use is a trademark of hip-hop lyrics. As natural as it often sounds, it sometimes is intentionally used for emphasis. The use of the infinitive "be" in place of its possible conjugations occurs quite a bit. In "Award Tour," Q-Tip says "I be" in the first line. In this situation, the resulting infinitive verb comes more from dropping the future tense "will" which should accompany it. Taken with the use of the word "so" as a conjunction, "will" is not actually necessary since the idea of a result is still implied. Therefore, the sentence does not lose any of its meaning in effect: "People give your ears so I be sublime."

Similar omission of verbs appears in the chorus of the songs, which is performed by Dove of De La Soul. The chorus begins "We on Award Tour." The meaning of this phrase is still fairly easy to understand. Lyrical, two syllables have been shaved away from the appropriate "We are on an Award Tour." Much the same, Q-Tip says "we speedy" in

the first verse. This seems more natural to speech. It omits the word "are," second person plural of the verb "to be." It does rid the line of a syllable, but it also gives the simple two-word phrase seemingly more permanence.

Another feature of hip-hop, which has consequently been carried into the rap lyrics of today, is the use of double prepositions. "Up in" is a common pairing of prepositions which can be used in many contexts but mostly refers to a sexual description. "Up out" is another fairly common pairing of prepositions used mostly to describe leaving. For example, Phife says "get up out the path" in "Award Tour." In fact, the prepositions are sometimes triple. Many times an emcee will say that he is going to "get up out of here."

Not much about the arrangement of words within hip-hop lyrics is a great deal different from conventional English. In fact, the lyrics are fairly easy to understand with a good listen or two. Some of the things which seem out of place are likely coined words or something particular to a certain rapper. All this results in the individuality of each emcee and his style.

In the end, hip-hop lyrics are not so different from everyday speech. In fact, they basically are street speech. Many people seem apprehensive of hip-hop at times for reasons unknown. Perhaps it is because the obscenity that the lyrics occasionally contain is more blatant and open than in other genres. The message of violence does not come from hip-hop music, however. Hip-hop is a lyrical form of dance and emerges from the spectrum of music as one of the most innovative art forms.

Justin's- Good work a-

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APPENDIX

represent (v): to recognize and honor one's neighborhood.

bag dimes (v): to have success with women.

shorty (n): an attractive member of the opposite sex.

bug out (v): to lose track of thought due to any reason.

wack (adj): unworthy of respect or laud.

mad (adv): very; (adj): excessive.

phat (adj): impressive.

diss (v): to disrespect verbally.

def (adj): 1. skillful. 2. excellent.

emcee (n): a hip-hop lyricist.

butter (adj): smooth and rich.